

New computer may speed mint orders

By Roger Boye

Uncle Sam is buying a new computer system to upgrade the processing of orders for government coin sets and medals.

"We're committed to giving our customers the best possible service, but our current computer is a detriment," said Francis B. Frere, the U.S. Mint's assistant director for marketing. "We can do a lot better."

Hobbyists often must wait at least 10 weeks to receive their merchandise from the mint. And in some cases, delivery time has stretched to six months or more, judging from reports of unhappy buyers.

Frere blames the slowness primarily on the mint's 12-year-old computer system. It was designed to process orders for a single product, such as proof sets in quantities of one to five sets a customer.

In recent years the mint's offerings to collectors have expanded greatly, with the advent of Olympic coins and other items. The new computer system, expected to be operational by next October, will give mint personnel "maximum flexibility in processing orders for a mixture of products," Frere said.

Meanwhile, mint executives are testing other changes designed to improve service. For example, this month the mint is shipping sets of uncirculated coins to collectors via first class mail and United Parcel Service, rather than registered mail as in the past, Frere said.

The new system should reduce delivery time and even costs, assuming that just a relatively small number of packages are lost in transit. If the experiment proves successful, a similar shipping method also may be used for other mint products.

● The United States Mint has secured special telephone lines to promote the sale of gold medallions honoring famous Americans in the arts.

The toll-free numbers are the latest marketing strategy used in the nearly five-year-old program. Government officials had hoped the medallions would become as popular as South African Krugerrands, but sales have languished, in part because of poor publicity.

Medallion prices are based on the Comex spot price of gold at the time of order plus a premium of \$12 to \$16 and mailing costs. The one-ounce piece dated 1984 features actress Helen Hayes and the half-ounce piece, author John Steinbeck.

For more information, call 800-368-5510; to place an order, call 800-USA-GOLD between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. The mint no longer will produce gold medallions after Dec. 31 and sales to individuals end on Jan. 31.